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ABSTRACT

Research pertaining to adult second-language learning from television is reviewed. It is proposed that course design and marketing must begin with considerations of basic factors such as students' needs, nature of the target language, the uses to be made of the language, and the linguistic skills being taught. Decisions can be made best by keeping in mind the linguistic and cultural distances between the student and the target language, and by recognizing the uniqueness of language learning. The review is intended to assist in planning for the acquisition, development, or enrichment of courses. Information is presented under three headings: (1) what is meant by "learning a second language"; (2) learner's needs and backgrounds; and (3) course design. A variety of sources were examined, including TVOntario research reports on adult second-language courses, recent periodical literature on teaching and learning a second language, and related distance education research. Recent television language courses were examined and professionals in the field were contacted. (MSE)

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TELEVISED SECOND-LANGUAGE COURSES FOR ADULTS: A REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH

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TELEVISED SECOND-LANGUAGE COURSES FOR ADULTS: A REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH

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Director, Evaluation and Project Research: Olga Kuplowska

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Abstract 8 — 1990-91

TELEVISED SECOND-LANGUAGE COURSES FOR ADULTS: A REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH

by
Avi Soudack, Research Consultant

(TVOntario, Evaluation and Project Research, Report No. 8 — 1990-91, 14 pp.)

This paper presents a brief review of research pertaining to adult second-language learning from television. It proposes that course design and marketing must begin with a consideration of basic factors such as students' needs, nature of the target language, the uses it will be put to, and the linguistic skills being taught. Decisions can best be made if we keep in mind the linguistic and cultural "distances" between the student and the target language, and recognize the uniqueness of language learning. This review is intended to assist in planning for the acquisition, development, or enrichment of future courses. Information is presented under three headings: what is meant by "learning a second language," learners' needs and backgrounds, and course design. A number of sources were examined, including TVOntario research reports on adult second-language courses, recent periodical literature on teaching and learning a second language, and related distance education research. Recent television language courses were examined and professionals in the field were contacted.

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Abrégé nº 14—1989-90

COURS TÉLÉVISÉS DE LANGUE SECONDE POUR ADULTES : REVUE DES RECHERCHES PERTINENTES

préparée par
Avi Soudack, Consultant de recherche

(TVOntario, Service de recherche et d'évaluation, rapport nº 14—1989-90, 14 pp.)

Ce document donne un bref aperçu des recherches sur les cours de langue seconde à la télévision. Il suggère que la préparation et la commercialisation des cours doivent débuter par un examen des principaux facteurs, comme les besoins des étudiants, la nature de la langue cible, les usages que l'on va en faire et les aptitudes linguistiques enseignées. On doit prendre les décisions en n'oubliant pas les «distances» linguistiques et culturelles entre l'étudiant et la langue cible, et en reconnaissant le caractère unique de l'apprentissage des langues. Cette revue est conçue pour faciliter la planification en vue de l'acquisition, de la préparation ou de l'amélioration de cours futurs. Les données sont présentées sous trois rubriques : ce que l'on entend par «apprendre une deuxième langue», les besoins et les antécédents des étudiants, et la conception des cours. On examine un certain nombre de sources, notamment des rapports de TVOntario sur les cours de langue seconde pour adultes, des articles récents de périodiques sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage d'une langue seconde, et les recherches connexes sur la formation à distance. Des cours de langues récents à la télévision ont été examinés et des professionnels du domaine ont été interviewés.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent TVOntario language courses for adults have attracted large numbers of registrants and many enthusiastic learners. How can we build on this success? This paper reviews existing research to assist in planning for the acquisition, development, or enrichment of future courses.

Existing research cannot answer the question "What makes a good TV-based course?" because that question raises so many others: "what language?" and "which adults?" But research literature and currently available courses highlight some basic options and point to the kind of information needed to make successful choices.[1]

The information available falls into three areas:

- what is meant by "learning a second language"
- learners' needs and backgrounds
- course design

Some of the issues that fall under these headings are common to all types of distance education; others are specific to broadcast courses. All are relevant to second-language learning, which is fundamentally different from information-oriented courses.

Material covered in this report

This paper includes a review of TVOntario research reports on adult second-language courses, recent periodical literature on teaching and learning a second language, and related distance education research. There is very little published work on televised adult second-language learning; most research has focused on children and on in-class instruction. TVOntario reports in this area are largely from the late 1970s. In addition, contact was made with researchers and course developers at other educational and public broadcasters, but this yielded little in the way of research or other reports. A variety of second-language courses was reviewed as well. (A bibliography, list of contacts made, and list of courses examined are at the end of this report.)

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1. Thanks to Danielle Constantin for her helpful comments and Louise Glegg for bibliographic assistance.

LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE

There are many types of courses that attempt to teach adults a second language: the variety is so great that it is difficult to make effective generalizations. Consider, for instance, the possible uses of a second language — a trip to the south of France, a trip to the Gaspé, reading Balzac, or reading an interoffice memo. Within this variety, the following themes emerge as vital in setting criteria and planning curricula in this area.

- The uniqueness of language study. Learning a language is fundamentally different from other forms of learning. Language is a skill; it is largely social; it is acquired, ultimately, through use; and it is a form of communication, and therefore closely connected with thought. The memorization of rules, vocabulary or any "content," though comforting to many adult learners, will not result in competence in a language. It must be used, and heard and seen in use.

- Is the language a "second" or a "foreign" language? A key issue in second-language learning is the relationship between the language being taught and the student's social environment. Most televised courses are actually concerned with teaching a "foreign" language: in Ontario, Spanish and Japanese are "foreign" languages for most people. On the other hand, newcomers to the province who learn English late in life are learning a "second" language.[1] French is unique in the Canadian context. In some ways, Ontario anglophones studying French are learning a "second" language. But in other ways it is like learning a "foreign" language — it is not the language of their home environment. The students' motivation to learn, the uses of language they are most concerned with, the feeling they have for the language and its culture(s) are all bound up in this question of "foreignness."

- Differences between the target language and the students' first language. Learning French or Italian may be difficult or easy, but the English speaker is on familiar ground because he or she shares an alphabet and many basic notions about how a language sounds. Learning Japanese or Russian means leaving behind some of these comforting landmarks — from the way consonants and vowels can be combined to the shape of the ABC.

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1. English as a second language is not covered in this report. For ESL learners, both the language being taught and their new social environment are English.

- Use of the language. A successful course must embody a student's goals. If the goal is travel or tourism, then certain aspects of the language become important and a short, one-time course may be what is called for. Learning a language for business purposes will raise other considerations and necessitate a focus on other types of social situations. Similarly, there are considerable differences in learning "out of interest" or learning with the intention of earning a credit.

- The four skills. A course that is intended to teach reading and writing skills will need to have a different orientation from one that targets speaking and listening skills. The skills taught in a course should be given relative priorities, so that the course can be designed around them.

- How high, how far? Learning involves commitment — but how much commitment is expected of the student, and how much does he intend to put in? There has to be a match between the student and the course, and one way to think of this relationship is in terms of level of proficiency. Is the course aiming at a high level? Is it organized around a progression of levels that the student is intended to follow consecutively (*French in Action*) or is the course aiming at a lower level of skill and offering a self-contained learning experience (*À vous la France*)? The length of a course or series of courses is affected by curriculum choices, and it in turn relates to students' needs and what they want from a course.

LEARNERS' NEEDS AND BACKGROUNDS

Many aspects of a course are determined by the kinds of people expected to register. Previous research gives us some indication of what to expect.

- Level of skill in the language. It is tempting to think that a registrant in an introductory course has little or no background in the area. In fact, people who enroll in televised courses commonly have some prior knowledge of the subject matter. The same pattern is found in classroom-based second-language courses for adults; second-language teachers even have a term for such students: "false beginners." People seem to take several runs at learning a language, or they return to it after a long hiatus. In televised second-language courses these two tendencies are combined. Most registrants in the *Brush Up Your French* academies had studied French before (in fact, the course was pitched at such students). Recent registrants in *French in Action* were all people who had studied French in the past.[1] And similarly, research in the early 1980s on BBC foreign language courses indicated that significant proportions (often the majority) of the audiences were not true beginners, even for courses not normally taught in school (e.g., Russian and Spanish).[2]

  In Ontario, the average "skill level" is probably most difficult to estimate for French courses, since so many Ontario adults have had some exposure to the language. There is a great range — from people with very minimal French, despite formal schooling in the language, to those with high levels of attainment. Knowledge of other languages is not as widespread, so demand for basic courses is more likely.

- Educational and social background. Research at TVOntario and elsewhere continues to show that registrants in home studies courses are highly educated and in the upper reaches of the economic and occupational scales. Registrants in language courses are no different in this respect, here and abroad. BBC audiences for language courses are similarly endowed. Programming for this sort of audience means taking into account students' high literacy rates, attitudes to education, critical or evaluative orientation to materials, and light, purposive TV viewing habits.

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1. Four registrants interviewed as part of the Home Studies Research by Evaluation and Project Research (1990).
2. In Bates (1984).

- Cultural relationship to new language. A course in Italian would attract some people who do not know anyone of Italian origin, but it might also attract people with Italian heritage for whom the culture surrounding the language is not foreign. This "cultural distance" between the learner and the language affects what sort of information the course can draw on and whether it should take an outsider's or an insider's point of view.

- Motives for studying languages. Second-language learners can be divided into two groups: those who study for practical reasons and those with social and cultural motives. Registrants in earlier TVOntario second-language courses seem to have been attracted largely for the latter: social and cultural reasons (at least, those we have data on, the *Brush Up Your French* series). Research literature often characterizes these different reasons for learning as "instrumental" (practical, job-oriented, etc.) or "integrative" (social, interpersonal, etc.).

- Reasons for registering in a television-based course. Registrants in these sorts of courses appear to be matching their interests and personal schedules with a course that offers the right degree of flexibility, formality, and required commitment.[1] Though convenience is critical, it is not paramount — for instance, several registrants in the *French in Action* series spoke approvingly about it as a "course," referring to its length and structure.

The key is the match between students' needs and course attributes. In one version of *Brush Up Your French*, people who registered and received regular tutor support and attended workshops were compared with those who only bought the print material. Both groups indicated high levels of satisfaction with the course. As Withers (1987) points out, the delivery system itself is not an issue; rather, what attracts registrants is the integration of components in a flexible structure.

1. Brown (1989) and Withers (1987).

COURSE DESIGN

Approaches to language teaching follow fashions and trends just like other cultural activities. So there is no "best" instructional design for adults. Also, television has changed: what worked and looked good in 1977 may not work or look good in 1990. There is agreement, however, among second-language educators on some basic tenets of curriculum design. About television-based distance education, some lessons can be drawn from previous experience.

- Accepted teaching approaches. Currently, most second-language educators accept, to some degree, that language teaching should:
  - emphasize communication
  - be organized around language functions (e.g., describing things, invitations, interviews)
  - draw links between the language and its cultural context

  These three dimensions of modern language curricula — communicative, functional, and cultural — are widely used in the creation of language-teaching materials, and are reflected in such courses as *French in Action* and *España viva* . For example, teaching a verb's conjugation in isolation from its use, using repetition and rote exercises, organizing a class or a course around a series of grammatical forms and unrelated vocabulary: these are frowned on. Instead, the emphasis is on passing on the skills to communicate and comprehend in real situations. Many modern syllabuses are organized around language functions, such as greetings, identity, or expressing pleasure and displeasure.

- Grammar. There has been considerable debate over the usefulness of teaching grammar. Some research shows that teaching grammar explicitly is no better than simply having students communicate in the target language. However, there are good reasons for including it in a course, especially a televised course. First, adult students nearly always *demand* explicit instruction in grammatical rules — they are more comfortable when grammar rules are taught. Second, in televised courses there is little opportunity for students to practise, so the additional information is more significant than for students in language classrooms. Ultimately, grammar can be included, in varying degrees and at different levels, and it need not conflict with the communicative and functional aspects mentioned above.

- Cultural material. The inclusion of "cultural" material seems *de rigueur* in all types of language courses now. Whatever the emphasis or level — touristic or academic, beginner or intermediate — courses almost always convey something about the culture in which the language is spoken. Information about food, art, lifestyles, and politics is commonly found in new course material — and has come to be expected by second-language learners. (Note, the inclusion of cultural material can raise problems if the "second culture" conflicts with the learners' "first." For instance, there have been allegations of sexism levelled at *French in Action*.[1])

- The amount of English. Courses vary in how much they use English, the student's mother tongue, as the medium of instruction. An immersion approach avoids English completely but is not practical for television. First, teaching on television requires at least some English to orient the student. Second, one of the immersion approach's major thrusts, the intensive use of the target language, must be abandoned. But what amount of English is best, and where and how it should be used, are questions that do not have simple answers. The *French in Action* series rarely uses direct translation, while *À vous la France* and *España viva* commonly give translation, with subtitles or narration. These difference reflect course designers' assessment of their audiences' needs and language levels.

- Course components. Most registrants in a course get a package of materials made up of different components, so it is difficult to identify what effect each has; but previous research gives us some information.

Print

The inclusion of print material is central to the experience of at-home study. Both research departments at TVOntario have shown that print material is highly valued by Home Studies course registrants. One example of this finding: the four registrants in *French in Action* who were interviewed found the materials very good, and seemed to appreciate the course the more for it.[2] Curiously, the material is appreciated even when registrants do not know exactly what to expect when they register (Brown, 1989). It may be that the material is partly symbolic: it represents the course and students' relationship to it.

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1. See Schulevitz (1990) for a report of American university students who complained of sexism in the course, after using the videos in their language laboratory.
2. Home Studies Research , EPR (1990).

In language courses the print component is important because it allows the student to take an active role by doing written exercises. It also provides an opportunity for the practice of grammar and exploration of structural aspects of the language. The print material is a particularly valuable component in televised language courses because it complements the stress on verbal and oral skills in the television program.

Audiotapes

Audiotapes are often part of at-home language courses and they seem to be well received, and in theory they permit easy review and practice. The audiotapes can also encourage verbal practice when the student can actually *produce* the language. However, no research has focused on this component, so it is hard to substantiate these ideas.

Videotapes

The role of videotapes is also unclear. Evaluation and Project Research reports indicate that many registrants in at-home courses do tape off air, and some registrants are interested in purchasing tapes. Three of the four *French in Action* registrants interviewed said they taped programs — but their taping and replaying do not seem to have been systematic (i.e., they do not tape all or any particular episodes). Withers' (1987) report on home study courses indicates that many registrants value repeat broadcasts very highly. Taping, repeat broadcasts, or purchase of tapes of second-language programs may serve two functions: they make a course more flexible for the student who can watch when time allows, and they may serve as a source of review and practice.

Tutors

There are two aspects to the issue of tutor support in course design: first, how well people learn with or without a tutor; second, students' satisfaction with the course with or without a tutor. It seems that when tutors are central to the design of a course and take an active role in it, tutor support seems to get good marks from registrants (such as in the *Brush Up Your French* academies). But in courses (second-language and other) that do not have tutor support, it is rarely missed. Withers (1987) found tutors ranked low on a list of possible

components. And in a previous second-language course where the tutor was available to take calls, few registrants actually called. One study of *Brush Up Your French* (Kuplowska, 1977) allows a comparison of registrants who had access to a tutor and workshops with people who chose not to use these "interpersonal" components. The full registrants tended to be more satisfied with the course, but the "independent" or non-tutor group still tended to be very or fairly satisfied.

From an educational point of view, verbal interaction is considered the basis of language learning. Presumably tutor-student dialogue in the target language would yield language gains, but no research information is available to substantiate this. But it is important to realize that a registrant in a course without a tutor could complete weeks of study without ever speaking a word of the language aloud.

- Feedback and error correction. Lack of feedback and the absence of practice in *producing* language mean that a televised course does not promote one major means of language learning and of language itself: speech. But educational effectiveness and students' satisfaction with a course are not related in any simple way. People are prepared to register in courses that do not have any feedback or interpersonal practice, and they appear to be satisfied with them.[1] At least, most are. Returning to the four registrants in *French in Action* who were interviewed this year, one person, who had the most difficulty with the course, commented on a lack of support. But her problem seems to have been the level of the course (too high for her), as much as the absence of feedback.

- Viewing drop-off. The problem of registrants dropping out of a course as it progresses is common to all types of distance education. TV-based second-language courses are no different. Ryback (1980) "found that on average about half the students dropped out from beginners' foreign-language courses, and about a third from the more advanced series" (Bates, 1984). There is further drop-off between courses.

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1. Just as Brown (1989) reported that many registrants did not use course materials but were still satisfied with the course.

Ryback claims to have cut the dropout rate on one series by half by providing support services, including a regular magazine/newspaper for registrants, self-help study groups, and telephone request service. This suggests that aside from their educational importance, support materials and services have a motivational effect. Perhaps at the beginning of a course the arrival of support materials and the onset of the television programs encourage the student and generate some excitement (the "first day of school effect"). Later in the course, when no further material or contact from a "teacher" is forthcoming, interest may wane. So it may be that mailing registrants course material throughout the course would bolster interest and motivation. Also, open-ended courses, which do not involve any form of certificate or diploma, lack a concrete symbol of completion. And without a final test, they do not provide a target to maintain student attention and discipline.

SUMMARY

Designing a television-based language course must begin by matching people's needs with course attributes. Identifying people's needs is not easy, especially in a multicultural society like Ontario with so many educational alternatives.[1] And questions of course design are complicated because they are so highly interrelated. But we can make a start by considering the linguistic difference between the first and second language: how different the target language is from the students' first language. We can also consider how great a cultural distance there is between the students' social environment and the culture of the second language. The students' reasons for learning the language and the uses to which they expect to put it also play a major role in course design.

In evaluating or designing a second-language course, we should ask some essential questions:

— Who is the student? Who is the teacher?

— What language and what aspects of language are being taught, at what level?

— When and where does learning take place? (e.g., when in a student's life, when in the day?)

— Why would a student register in this particular course?

These are not trivial questions. Posed seriously and answered after some inquiry, they are the first steps in course planning. From these underlying issues arise the specific questions of marketing, programming, and course design.

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1. Even in European countries with one dominant language and more unified culture, the ascertainment of students' needs has been a complex, open-ended process. Richterich, R. (1983), *Case Studies in Identifying Language Needs*.

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España viva. Radio and television course. Video, audio tapes, and student book. BBC, 1987. (TVO contact: Leslie Coates; BBC Marketing: Helen Jackson, 011-44-1-576-2263; series producer: David Wilson)

Parlez-moi. TVOntario, 1977.

How Do You Do? TVOntario, 1989-90.

Note: *Suivez la piste*, the major television component of the *Brush Up Your French* academies, was not screened. It is no longer held on videotape at TVOntario.

RESEARCHERS AND EDUCATORS CONTACTED

Miryam Benovich, Director, Living Language Services Inc. (613) 233-8075
Consultant and second-language educator, Benovich was interested in this project but unable to suggest any published or unpublished material. She promised to send a list of questions and issues that her teaching team has been drawing up. It has not arrived at this time.

Beryl Crooks, Institute of Educational Technology, Open University (0908) 652-606
Crooks indicated that the Open University does not offer language courses by television, and has no reasearch reports on the subject.

Robin McGregor, Head, Special Projects, Broadcasting Research Department, BBC (01) 576-7224
McGregor has forwarded a research publication on learning languages from the BBC.

Carol Greenwald, Project Director, *French in Action*, WGBH (617) 492-2777 ext. 3817
Greenwald said that focus groups were used in producing *French in Action*, but no reports are available on them. Also, to her knowledge, no background or ascertainment work has been done.

Joanne Grason, *French in Action*, Annenberg CPB Foundation (202) 879-9648
Grason has forwarded a list of research reports. None dealt exclusively with adult second-language learning.

END

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